

## A SOCIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF TABOOS AND EUPHEMISMS IN MALI: A CASE STUDY OF KHASSONKE SPEAKERS

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**Abstract:** This study investigates taboo words and euphemistic expressions used by the Khassonke speakers in Mali. It also examines the effect of the social variables: age, gender and occupation on the use of these words and expressions. To achieve the objective of this study, some focus groups were organized with 40 male and female participants purposively selected according to their age and occupation. The results of the study identify certain categories of some social taboo words and euphemistic expressions such as death, sexuality and sex, which are often used among participants irrespective of their age, gender or occupation. The results pointed out that the social variables affect the use of these expressions only in certain situations. For instance, the above 40 years-old participants more often use euphemized expressions than those who are under 40 years-old. In addition, males and females use different expressions only when trying to reduce the painful effects of some sexual taboos. This study of Khassonke taboo and euphemistic expressions intends to shed light on the understanding of sociolinguistic phenomenon in Mali.

**Keywords:** euphemistic expressions, taboo, Khassonke, sexuality, death

### ANALYSE SOCIOLINGUISTIQUE DES TABOUS ET EUPHEMISMES AU MALI : UNE ETUDE DE CAS DES LOCUTEURS KHASSONKE

**Résumé:** Cette étude a examiné les mots tabous et les expressions euphémiques utilisés par les locuteurs Khassonke au Mali. Elle a également examiné l'effet des variables sociales : âge, sexe et profession sur l'utilisation de ces mots et expressions. Pour atteindre l'objectif de l'étude, des groupes de discussion ont été organisés avec 40 participants hommes et femmes sélectionnés à dessein en fonction de leur âge et de leur profession. Les résultats de l'étude ont permis d'identifier certaines catégories de mots et expressions euphémiques et tabous sociaux tels que la mort, la sexualité et le sexe, qui sont plus utilisés parmi les participants indépendamment de leur âge, de leur sexe ou de leur profession. Les résultats ont souligné que les variables sociales n'affectent l'utilisation de ces expressions que dans certaines situations. Par exemple, les participants âgés de plus de 40 ans ont utilisé plus d'expressions euphémiques que ceux qui ont moins de 40 ans. En outre, les hommes et les femmes n'ont utilisé des expressions différentes que lorsqu'ils ont essayé de réduire les effets douloureux de certains tabous liés à la sexualité et au sexe. L'étude du tabou et des expressions euphémiques khassonke permettra certainement de mieux comprendre le phénomène sociolinguistique au Mali.

**Mots-clés :** expressions euphémiques, tabou, Bamanankan, sexualité, mort

## Introduction

The practice of taboo words in a language is common in many societies. In some African societies people avoid mentioning certain words and expressions because of their lack of decorousness, shocking character or profligacy. Taboo words are substituted with euphemistic expressions in order not to hurt members of the society. In this perspective, death, sex and sexuality have been identified as topics, which emerged from the focus group discussion. Death is one of the topics the Khassonke speakers avoid in conversation. Similarly, speakers are also not comfortable talking directly about sex and sexuality. Instead, they prefer to substitute the words and expressions, perceived unpleasant, with pleasant euphemism. Therefore, speakers of Khassonke use alternative expressions to replace the unpleasant taboo words or expressions related to death, sex and sexuality. These euphemistic expressions are used to show politeness and reduce the painful effects of taboo words and expressions. In this perspective, Crespo (2005, p.78) states "Euphemism is a phenomenon intrinsically linked to the conventions of politeness and social tact expected in interpersonal communication". For instance, the Khassonke speakers usually use colloquial figurative language with friends, relatives when announcing death case; this is a way to lessen the painful effects of death such as: [a be tonṅa su], (literal meaning: He/she is in the house of truth) or the use of [a min jiyɔ dɔhɔyata], (literal meaning: He does not have much drinking water) to indicate that someone is dead. So, death is clearly a social context in which the taboo expressions are used and the degree of interlocutors' relationship affects the choice of death euphemistic expressions. Farghal (1995, p.267) supports this point by saying that "the language user's option for a euphemism often emanates from contextual factors such as the social relationship between the speaker and the addressee or the level of formality induced by the setting".

One of the natures of human being is to live in social groups and the members of these societies express their feelings, attitude and beliefs through communication and cooperation. Hence, the appropriate use of words by speakers helps them to accomplish successful communication. Many researchers and disciplines such as sociolinguistics, psychology and pragmatics, etc. are interested in the topic of euphemism as a communication strategy. Within the same context, Holmes (2001, p.1) argues that "sociolinguistics is concerned with the relationship between language and the context in which it is used". In other words, Holmes provides some explanations thinking that sociolinguistics studies the relationship between language and society and why people do speak differently in different contexts. The euphemistic expressions are used as a tool that helps people communicate politely and effectively to avoid expressions that hurt. Without the euphemistic expressions, many words of the languages would be considered as rude. Ren and Yu (2013, p.45)

propound that euphemism is a form of language intentionally created in social relations to achieve ideal communication.

Euphemism is etymologically originated from a Greek language “*eu*” meaning “good” and “*pheme*” meaning “speak” which can be defined as speaking with good words. Therefore, euphemistic expressions are used to replace taboo words. From this simple definition, many scholars have defined euphemism in various ways. Euphemism is defined as an act of substituting an offensive or unpleasant word for a more pleasant one, thereby veneering the truth by using kind words (Leech, 1981; Enright, 1985). Allan and Burrige (1991) propose “A euphemism is used as an alternative to a dispreferred expression in order to avoid possible loss of face, either one’s own or, by giving offense, that of the audience, or of some third party”. In other words, these authors define it by focusing on the context in which the speaker and the hearer are located. Euphemism is thus a face moderator taking into account the mutual cooperation between both speaker and hearer.

Taboo is defined as the prohibition or avoidance in any society of behavior believed to be harmful to its members in it that would cause them anxiety, embarrassment or shame (Wardhaugh 2000, p.234). This is to say, taboo is a cultural variable that refers to the expressions or actions that are culturally repudiated. It is virtually a cultural phenomenon; all cultures have specific taboos. It touches every aspect of the individual life (Bello, 2014). There are taboo words related to profession, health, sex, ritual and so on. Some cultures place more emphasis on some taboos than others. For instance, in the Khassonke community and culture, sexual and ritual taboos appear to be the commonest and the strongest. With respect to body parts, for instance, the Khassonke communities generally squirrel away expressions that may create curiosity in their children. Hence, parts such as penis and the vagina are usually called by other names usually by terms with which they are familiar and which do not compromise understanding. So, in place of *Hayo* (penis) and *buto* (vagina), many adults Khassonke speakers have their children and other people refer to those parts as *heya* (manly) and *musuya* (womanly).

Generally, taboo and Euphemistic expressions have common origins which can be found in most of the world’s languages. One of the most significant functions of euphemisms, according to Pavlenko (2006, p.260), is “to protect speakers from undesired emotional arousal”. Commenting on this function, Miller (1999) has pointed out that given the existence of concepts deemed too offensive to speak about in almost all the world’s languages, there exists a need for speakers of different languages to find roundabout, indirect and socially acceptable ways of referring to such concepts. According to him, euphemisms can fulfill this important function by sanitizing the language which the speakers’ use. Therefore, the bidirectional relationship that holds language and culture is also true for taboo and euphemism.

The aims of this study are to identify the taboo and euphemistic expressions in Khassonke and to perceive the attitude of the Khassonke speakers. Such a purpose is achieved by answering the following research questions that guided our analysis: what are the attitudes of Khassonke speakers towards the use of taboos and euphemism in Khassonke? Do Khassonke speakers use taboo and euphemistic expressions in mixed-sex groups? What are the most used euphemism expressions to replace taboos in Khassonke?

### **1. Origin of Taboo and Euphemistic expressions**

Euphemism: who doesn't use it? Even those who pride themselves on never practicing "langue de bois" - the euphemistic, negatively connoted version of "euphemism" - use it, often unconsciously, as Rawson (1981, p.1) notes in Denis Jamet (2006, p.31). Euphemisms are embedded so deeply in our language that few of us, even those who pride themselves on being plain speakers, never get through a day without using them. Not only do all speakers use them, but they are found at all levels of language and in all registers, thus representing a quasi-synonym that is intended to be "neutral" or "unmarked" in relation to a "marked" term. If euphemism is not an essentially linguistic phenomenon, a "lexicogenic matrix" for J. Tournier, it is a sociolinguistic phenomenon, in other words the linguistic expression of a social fact; euphemism is the manifestation of a taboo. Tournier (1985, p.261). The English term euphemism first appeared in Thomas Blount's *Glossographia* in 1656. It is defined by the Webster Dictionary as: the substitution of an agreeable or inoffensive expression for one that may offend or suggest something unpleasant <pass away is a widely used euphemism for die>. And by Henri Morier's *Dictionary of Poetics and Rhetoric* (1998: 480) as a: a figure of speech by which one softens the expression of an idea deemed brutal or too bitter. Etymologically, the term "euphemism" / euphemism comes from the Greek *euphèmos*, itself derived from the adjective *euphèmos*, "auspicious" (from *eu*, "good", and *phèmi*, "I say"). The euphemism refers to an extra linguistic reality by taking on another form, another signifier; this is why it is often referred to as a "veil" thrown over the signified, as if to camouflage it. To classify the taboo domains, we quote the rather complete taxonomy proposed by J. Tournier (1985, pp.271-274) in Denis Jamet:

Beliefs (God, Jesus, the devil, hell, cursing, swearing). The human body and its functions (body parts, nudity, (under)clothing, urination, defecation, toilet, stench, sexuality - organs, act, contraception, menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth - physical imperfections - weight, baldness, flatulence, vomiting, diarrhea, constipation, indisposition, illnesses - mental imperfections and illnesses - lack of intelligence, insanity, establishments - old age, death). Morality and society (lying, dishonesty, "dissolute" life, alcoholism, drugs, prostitution, homosexuality, pornography, theft, prison, poverty, humble occupations, racial differences).

Denis Jamet (2006, p.32)

It is important to note that euphemism is primarily a sociolinguistic process. It is always connected to the society in which it is born, evolves and dies, and reflects one's conception of reality. Thus, what may be a euphemism for some may seem like nonsense or something else to people outside the group. As D. Enright (2005) notes:

If you are a West Indian, for example, you and your mates might quite happily refer to yourselves as 'niggahs' (the pronunciation deliberate), but the word 'nigger' is socially taboo, especially so when used by a white person.

As D. Enright (2005, p.122)

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1 Research Design**

The researchers used a mixed method approach. Data were collected using the qualitative technique of Focus Group Discussions, which allowed to elicit reliable responses from the informants and this took two months (June and July 2020).

### **2.2. Participants**

The researchers have purposively selected 10 participants from four communes which give a total number of 40 informants. The participants are men and women from 18 to 58 years old; they were sampled according to the age, gender and occupational affiliation.

### **2.3. Procedure**

Two focus group discussions were conducted in each of the four selected communes of Khasso (Kayes). The researchers introduced themselves to the students and explained the purpose of the study. The consent of informants was sought prior to their participation and their privacy was guaranteed to the extent that information would never be traced to these respondents. Each focus group session started with a brief introduction of the members and the topic of discussion. Later, the researchers summarized the main points for respondents to make comments on or ask questions about. The researchers ensured

respondents that their responses were kept confidentially and used purely for academic research.

### 2.4. Data Analysis

The audio recordings of the focus groups were transcribed, and we employed constant comparison analysis (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2008) for coding and grouping the responses by paying attention to terms, contexts, meanings, and examples used by respondents. Responses in Khassonke are retained in their original forms for authenticity although they were translated to English during data analysis for communicative purposes.

### 3. Results

Before undertaking the taboo and euphemistic expressions, it is necessary to know the age, gender, occupation of the participants and their attitude to the use of taboo and euphemism.

Table 1: Gender and age of the participant

Age	Female	Male	Total
18-25	8	11	19
26-36	4	4	8
37-45	2	3	7
46-58	2	4	6
Total	16	22	40

Table 2: Occupations of the participants

Occupations	Female	Males	Total
Nurses	1	2	3
Doctors	/	1	1
University students	3	4	7
Shop keepers	5	7	12
Bus driver	1	6	7
Housewives	6	/	6
Administrator	1	3	4
total	17	23	40

Table 3: Attitude toward the use of taboo and euphemism in Bamanankan.

Motivation	Number of respondents
Yes	29
No	11
TOTAL	40

The informants were to answer the question whether they liked using the taboo and euphemistic expressions in Khassonke. Responses during the focus group discussions showed that there are many categories within which the euphemistic expressions are used to replace taboos in Khassonke. In this research we have identified three categories which are the death taboos, the sexuality, sex taboos, and some social taboos. These taboos and their euphemistic expressions are presented in the tables below.

Table 4: Euphemism for death Taboos in Bamanankan

Taboo	Literal meaning	Euphemism	Literal meaning
saaya	death	baano	He is finished
a saata	He died	a minjiyo dɔxɔyata	He does not have much drinking water
	He died	manso xa ala xarifo muta a la	The almighty took what had been entrusted to him
	He died	Allah la kililo sita a ma	He has been called by the almighty
	He died	a bɛ tonɲa su	He/she is in the house of truth
	The deceased	banbaxatɔ/fore	The finished
	He died	a suma yelemata	He changed the house
	He/she drowned	a tuta jiyoto	He stayed in the water

The euphemism related to death taboos is the most common and are various. There is death every day and the euphemistic words and expressions are used for the announcement and the burial of the body. This table shows many types of death euphemism to avoid the term *saaya* in Khassonke unless they use it unconsciously. At this level, the elderly persons were at ease with the death euphemism more than the young people and women.

Table 5: euphemism relating to sexual activities and sex taboos in Bamanankan

Taboo	Literal meaning	Euphemism	Literal meaning
fɔtɔ/xayo	Penis	xeya	manly
a ma jennoxoya ke fɔb	She never had sexual intercourse (She is still virgin)	a bɛ su	She is at home
a fɔtɔ baa dimina	He has sex ache	a dugumala be a dimina	He feels pain down
a xa musukuwo ke	He had sex out of marriage	a xa jɛɲɛya ke	He committed adultery
a xe ban xa je ni a xe ti	She refused to have sex with her husband	a xa laranwo tegɛ a xe la	She cut the bed to her husband
jennoxoya xadi a ɲɛ	he loves having sex	a la musukuwo xa bun	His desire for women is great

This second category of taboos and euphemistic expressions is the most used after that of death. It is very difficult for the participants to use these taboo words in other conversational contexts except one who talks with friends. Some participants including the healthcare agents were at ease when giving their opinions about this topic.

Table 6: Euphemism Used For Some Social Taboos

Taboo	Literal meaning	Euphemism	Literal meaning
bulukilinwo	Handicapped with one arm	lojuratɔ	Incomplete man
din wulu la	Baby is born	muso bangelikela	The woman is down
a xɔɔma mu	She is pregnant	a lalinwo lemu	She is stood
Jelu bonwo	Bleeding (menstruation)	a bulo bɛ jiyoto	Her hands are in the water
Jelu bon na	End of menstruation	Kulo banta	End of taking shower
janaya dinwo	bastard	ɲamɔxɔ dinwo	a child born out of dating
a xeya saa linwo le mu	His penis is dead	kurutijala la xoso	His waistband is flouted

This third category is not used all the time as the previous ones. Some of these terms are only used either by women or by men and others by both.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1 Results relating to the first research question

What are the attitudes of Khassonke speakers towards the use of euphemistic expressions and taboos in Khassonke

**Table 1: Speakers' Attitudes towards Taboo Usage:** As the table about Attitudes towards Taboo Usage show, the majority of Khassonke speakers i.e 29 out of 40 informants declared that they use taboo expression, whereas the rest of the participants (11) answered this question negatively. Besides, most participants, whose responses are positive, are teenagers and adolescents, whereas those, whose answers are negative, are between 40 and 55 years old. Interestingly, it should be important to note that age plays a crucial role in pushing people to employ taboo items. Those who are young are not afraid to use the taboo words purely; in contrast the elders who got more life experiences are cautious to use them because they know their meaning.

### 4.2 Results relating to the second research question:

*Do Khassonke speakers use taboo expression in mixed-sex groups?* The results show that Khassonke speakers use the euphemistic words of taboo instead of the taboo words. The research has identified three main categories of taboo within which the Khassonke speakers use the euphemistic words and expressions. These three categories are: the death taboos, the sexuality and sex taboos, ended with some social facts taboos.

### 4.2 Results relating to the third research question

*What are the most used euphemistic expressions to replace taboos in Khassonke.* First, one should note that the attitudes of speakers towards the use of taboos differ according to their gender, age and the occupation. Some taboo words such as homosexuality, incest, offence to religions is forbidden to utter even their euphemistic use can hurt people in Malian societies. So the participants have decided to avoid these topics in focus groups. Apart from that many euphemism expressions are used to express taboos in Khassonke. The first category is in **Table 4: euphemisms for death Taboos in Khassonke.** The Khassonke speakers use many other euphemistic words to express **death = saaya**. To express a death in the area: they rather use *banno* which means ending. He died (a *saata*) considered as taboo: people use a softer substitution (*a min jiyo dɔɔyata*) meaning =He does not drink water anymore. Death can also be expressed by:

- *Manso x' a la xarfo muta a la* = The almighty took what had been entrusted to him
- *Allah xa kililo sita a ma* = He has been called by the almighty
- *A be tonɲa su* = He/she is in the house of truth.
- *A suma yelemata* = He changed the house.

However, the deceased person is called *banbaxatɔ̄/fure* meaning the finished to avoid the taboo words *Saaya*. Similarly, in the sentence He/she drowned (*a saata jiyoto*), they would say *A tuta jiyoto* = He stayed in the water.

Table 5: euphemism relating to sexual activities and sex taboos in Khassonke

Below are some example sentences relating to the sex taboo:

The organ, *Penis*, is named *fɔtɔ̄/xayo* but the Khassonke speakers would *xeya* = manly. *She is still virgin*, the taboo expression is *a ma jɛnoxoya kɛ fɔlɔ̄*; however, the polite way to say it by the Khassonke speakers is *a bɛ su* = She is at home. Another taboo expression is *a fɔtɔ̄/xayo baa dimina* means *He has sex ache*, the way of saying it is *a dugumala baa dimina* meaning *He is feeling pain down*. *He had sex out of marriage* *a xa musukuwoke* is taboo; however, *a ye jɛneya kɛ*. He committed adultery is the euphemistic expression. *A banta xa jɛ ni a xɛ ti* = *She refused to have sex with her husband*; the Khassonke speakers politely say it as *a xa laranwo tegɛ a xɛ la*, she cut the bed with her husband. *jɛnoxoya xadi a ɲe* = he loves having sex; people often say *a la mosukuwo xa bun* meaning that *His love for women is great*.

Table 6: Euphemism Used For Some Social Taboos

There are some specific euphemistic words to express social taboo in Khassonke. The first example of taboo is *Bulukilinwo* = Handicapped with one arm; the polite way to say it is *lojuratɔ̄* meaning *Incomplete man*. Another example taboo is *din wulu la* = Baby is born; the suitable expression is *moso jigila* which means literally *Lady has come down*. A third example of taboo is *a xɔɔma mu* = Pregnant woman, the euphemism is *a lolinwo lemu* meaning *She is stood up*. It is forbidden to say *Jelu bon* = menstruation, but we can say *a bulo bɛ jiyo to* meaning that *her hands are in the water*. Similarly, forbidden to say *Jelu bonwo banta* = End of menstruation; it is replaced with *Kulo banta* = End of taking shower. A *bastard* might be called in Khassonke *jɛneya dinwo* but the term used for that is *ɲamɔwo dinwo* meaning *a child of dating*. In Khassonke a man will not say *a xeya saa linwo lemu* which means literally his penis is dead, but it is said *kuruti jala la xoso* = His waistband is flouted.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the Khassonke speakers have positive attitudes towards the use of taboos. But, in reality, they prefer using euphemistic words and expression to replace the taboo words and expressions. It is concluded that the study has identified three main categories of taboos which were substituted by euphemistic expressions. The three domains of taboo were related to death, sex and some social phenomena. The study revealed that although it is always necessary to identify taboo words, their use may depend on the speakers who

perceive them as communication strategies. Many Khassonke speakers will find it interesting to know what is allowed to utter in the society and what is not. Languages are constantly changing: forms and meanings evolve. The linguistic changes we have just analyzed are in principle premeditated, calculated, intentional, in other words not spontaneous. One thus practices "verbal hygiene" in order to rid the word of all that, as in a utopian world, should not be said. The linguistic evaluation is then exercised by those who want to protect the language from any defect, to improve it for various reasons such as politeness, propriety, the adequacy to the reality. But it also takes place a contrario, when linguistic novelties are criticized because we want the language to remain authentic; and the publications of this kind type abound just about everywhere. Language appears in this way as a symbolic place of inscription of social disagreements: both through the purification that strives to sanitize the discourse that by the criticism even of this acceptance reveals the desire of a perfect communication, which can never be because of the distance between words and reality. In fact, because of what hinders, the euphemism, the LB and PC create a tacit climate of censorship and are most effective when they are not noticed. This would be the proof of the success of the communicative act, otherwise, when one suspects otherwise, when one suspects that it is being evasive, the discernment that leads to its failure is guaranteed. And it is there that arise the critical remarks of the militant critics. However, in any case, the expressions promoted by these three discursive processes are then taken up by the public, which the public, which incorporates them little by little without realizing it to the everyday language, "lulled" by a discourse of which it is used and which seems natural to him.

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